

Religion, God and the Meaninglessness of it all in Woody Allen's Thought and Films

"I just wanted to illustrate, in an entertaining way, that there is no God."
(Woody Allen on *Crimes and Misdemeanors*)¹

Johanna Petsche

In his films dating from 1975 to 1989 Woody Allen rigorously explores themes of religion, God, morality and death as he compulsively examines and questions his atheistic outlook. At the core of these films lies Allen's existential dilemma in which his intellectual tendency towards atheism conflicts with his emotional need for meaning, objective moral values and justice, all of which he strongly associates with the existence of God. There will be an analysis of Allen's treatment of religious and existential themes in *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), with a focus on the various ways that he portrays his existential dilemma. Allen absorbs and integrates into his films an assortment of philosophical ideas and biblical themes. References will be made to Camus, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Kant, and to passages from *Genesis*, the *Book of Job*, *Ecclesiastes* and the *Book of Jeremiah*. First however it is necessary to consider Allen's Jewish background as, despite his protestations to the contrary, it clearly plays a significant role in his life and films.

Born Allan Stewart Konigsberg in 1935, Allen was raised in a middle-class Jewish community in Flatbush, Brooklyn. For at least part of his childhood his family spoke Yiddish, "a convenient secret language, rich in terms of irony and scepticism, and as such central to Jewish humour".² Allen's parents are of European Jewish descent and although they were born and raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, their lives were always dominated by the *shtetl* their parents fled but whose ways they continued to embrace.³ Allen attended both synagogue and Hebrew school until he was bar mitzvahed at the age of thirteen, but by twenty had anglicised his name and completely disengaged from the Jewish faith. He readily admits to having never been convinced by Judaism: "I was unmoved by the synagogue, I was not interested in the *seder*, I was not interested in the Hebrew school, I was not interested in being Jewish. It just didn't mean a thing to me. I was not ashamed of it nor was I proud of it. It was a non factor to me, I didn't care about it".⁴ Allen not only plays down the impact of Judaism on his childhood, he trivializes its influence on his work: "It's not on my mind: it's not part of my artistic consciousness. There are certain cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews I guess, but I think they're largely superficial."⁵

Allen's comments seem remarkable considering that he has been universally identified as a Jewish figure since the beginning of his career. Mast states, "Allen, unJewish, is as unthinkable as Chaplin without his cane, Groucho without his cigar, or Fields without his nose".⁶ Allen's comedy is characterized by satirical quips about Jewish mothers, Hassidic rabbis and Old Testament biblical figures, his dialogue is peppered with Yiddishisms, and his characters often employ a typically Jewish form of intellectual scrutinizing (usually over metaphysical issues). Berger suggests that the latter stems from the argumentative patterns of Talmudic reasoning, and the intellectual efforts to understand and refine the requirements of *halacha*. He argues, "this unique cognitive style carried over into a period when Jewish minds turned to secular problems... [and] can be detected in Jewish wit".⁷

The most evident example of the considerable influence of Allen's Jewish background on his films is undoubtedly his masterfully crafted Jewish characters. Allen explores and

¹ Richard Schickel: *Woody Allen: A Life in Film*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2003, 149.

² John Baxter: *Woody Allen: A Biography*, London, Harper Collins, 1998, 11.

³ Eric Lax: *Woody Allen: A Biography*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991, 12.

⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

⁵ Sam B. Girgus: *The Films of Woody Allen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 112.

⁶ Gerald Mast: 'Woody Allen: The Neurotic Jew as American Clown' in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humour*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, 126.

⁷ Peter L. Berger: *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1997, 92-93.

exaggerates Jewish stereotypes through his central characters, and these stereotypes have become recognisable to an international audience. Allen's typical *shlemiel* figure comes in the form of an overly verbal, compulsively self-absorbed, Manhattan-worshipping Jew. Usually also endowed with an inordinate sexual appetite, an obsession with death and a range of phobias and neuroses. This character is exemplified by Boris Grushenko in *Love and Death*, Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall*, Mickey Sachs in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Larry Lipton in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, Harry Block in *Deconstructing Harry* and Lenny Weinrib in *Mighty Aphrodite*, to name a few. These roles are played to perfection by Allen himself.

Allen's wish to divorce himself from the Jewish tradition - a tradition that has so obviously infiltrated his work - reveals his strong aversion to religion and God: "I never thought about [God] seriously until I was a teenager, and then all feelings were negative from the start."⁸ However the profusion of Jewish and religious material and themes in his work indicates a more complex relationship with religion. That is, Allen may be an atheist but he relentlessly struggles to come to terms with what he sees as the consequence of his belief system; a meaningless universe completely indifferent to one's actions. This compels him to compulsively question and explore religion and the possibility of God's existence. Judaism, the religion with which he is most familiar, becomes his most effective tool for exploring such issues, and the most powerful weapon for attacking them. Religious and existential matters are an ongoing concern for Allen and he expresses this, to the viewer's great delight, in his art. This paper will analyse *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, two films that reveal two different approaches to religious and existential issues. In the former these issues are explored comically and cynically, and existential matters are optimistically resolved; Mickey is redeemed through an embracing of the zany absurdity of life. In the latter Allen's approach is serious and philosophical, and he leaves existential themes hopelessly unresolved; Allen creates a bleak world that offers no hope of salvation for anyone unwilling to blind oneself to reality.

In *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) Allen explores themes of religion, God, death and meaning through the comic character of television producer Mickey Sachs (Woody Allen). Three aspects of the film will be explored; Mickey's problem with and solution to the meaninglessness of life, the sequence entitled "The Big Leap" where Allen expresses his view of religion as archaic, exclusionary and ultimately unconvincing and finally, Mickey's peculiar form of salvation in the movie theatre. Convinced early in the film that he has the classic symptoms of an inoperable brain tumour, Mickey is momentarily relieved to hear that his cancer tests are negative. However moments later this good news leads him to reflect on his mortality and he nervously asks his office assistant, "Do you realize what a thread we're hanging by? Can't you understand how meaningless everything is?" Even though his health scare turns out to be a false alarm, Mickey is suddenly confronted with the immediacy and inevitability of death, and begins to equate the certainty of death in a world without God with a meaningless world. Mickey reasons that without God there cannot be an afterlife, so death becomes the ultimate end and everyday duties and moral actions seem utterly inconsequential. This may explain why Mickey later considers adopting Christianity and the Hare Krishna faith rather than turning to Judaism, the religion he was born into. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and the Hare Krishna faith offer the possibility of an afterlife. This idea appears in the biblical *Ecclesiastes*; "What does a man gain for the efforts he makes?"⁹; and "The fate of man and beast are identical; one dies, the other too... man has no advantage over the beast, for all is vanity. Both go to the same place".¹⁰ If death is the ultimate end for all beings, it is implied that one's actions in life are ultimately irrelevant.

Mickey's eschatological angst leads him to quit his job and eventually contemplate suicide, evoking Albert Camus' (1913-1960) 'absurd man' in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus explores the relationship between suicide and the absurd, and questions whether suicide is a valid solution to the absurd. He concludes that one must reject suicide and embrace life's absurdity through an acknowledgment of the contradiction between

⁸ Ken Kelley: 'A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen' in Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblenz (eds.), *Woody Allen Interviews*, USA, University Press of Mississippi, 2006, 25.

⁹ *Ecclesiastes* 3:9

¹⁰ *Ecclesiastes* 3:19-20

the irrational nature of things and the human need for reason and logic. For Camus, one gains dignity through one's decision to live in spite of the absurd. In *Hannah and Her Sisters* Mickey comes to a similar realization.

Mickey deduces that the only reason that life could possibly be meaningful, and thus worth living, is if God exists: "I've got to have something to believe in, otherwise life is just meaningless." Allen often makes the connection in his films between a meaningful life and the existence of God. Take for example the following exchange in *Love and Death*:

BORIS: Sonja, what if there is no God? What if we're just a bunch of absurd people who are running around with no rhyme or reason?

SONJA: But if there is no God then life has no meaning. Why go on living? Why not just kill yourself?

BORIS: Well, let's not get hysterical, I could be wrong. I'd hate to blow my brains out and then read in the papers they found something.

This is comparable to Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) conclusion to a line of metaphysical reasoning in his *1914-1916 Notebooks*, "To believe in God means to see that life has meaning."¹¹ In existentialist thought 'the meaning of life' - life's ultimate explanation and justification - is often associated with God's existence. It is no surprise then that Mickey's ensuing quest for meaning takes the form of a series of scenes entitled "The Big Leap" where he turns to various religions in an attempt to renew his lapsed relationship with God. Allen's merciless ridiculing of religious institutions, doctrine and people in this sequence reveals his great disdain for organized religion.

Mickey is first depicted in this sequence sitting uncomfortably in a Catholic presbytery where he discusses his existential crisis with a priest. When the priest asks him why he wants to convert to Catholicism Mickey remarks, "Well, you know... first of all because it's a very beautiful religion. It's very well structured. Now I'm talking incidentally about the against-school-prayer, pro-abortion, anti-nuclear wing." Allen draws attention to conservative Catholic beliefs as he portrays religion as archaic and irrelevant in contemporary society. The priest explains to Mickey that he would need to make a "very big leap," but Mickey assures the priest that he is willing to try anything: "I'll, you know, I'll dye Easter eggs if it works." Here Allen undermines the seriousness of religious conversion by reducing it to a popular activity that has more to do with secular holidays than theological doctrine.

The 'leap of faith' is a central motif in both *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and indeed the caption for this sequence is "The Big Leap." The concept was explored at length by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), one of Allen's favourite philosophers, who argued that the transition from a life without faith to a life with faith could not possibly occur as a rational transition, but as an enormous 'leap of faith.' In his treatise *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard discusses the biblical story in which God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac.¹² Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's obedience and total trust in God is unintelligible to prudential and moral reason and thus is absurd: "[Abraham] believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question."¹³ Kierkegaard portrays religious faith as preposterous and paradoxical as it necessarily implies a rejection of logic and reason. Similarly Allen asserts, "Faith can't be come to by reason - it's a gift, perhaps even a blind spot or flaw, but helpful like a denial mechanism."¹⁴ In his later *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard develops this argument by exploring the paradox of Christ: "Christianity has declared itself to be the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time. It has proclaimed itself as the Paradox, and it has required of the

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Notebooks 1914-1915*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), USA, University of Chicago Press, 1961, 74.

¹² *Genesis* 22

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard: *Fear and Trembling*, Sylvia Walsh (trans.), UK, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 29.

¹⁴ Woody Allen: 'My Philosophy' in Woody Allen, *Complete Prose of Woody Allen: Without Feathers, Getting Even, Side Effects*, New York, Picador, 1997, 268.

individual the inwardness of faith in relation to that which is an offence to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks - and an absurdity to the understanding.”¹⁵

Playing on the stereotype of the guilt-inducing Jewish mother, Allen segues to a sobbing, hysterical Mrs Sachs who remains for the entire scene distraught and locked in the bathroom after hearing the news of her son's plan to convert to Catholicism. By portraying Mickey's mother as utterly devastated, Allen emphasizes the club-like mentality of religious followers. Similarly in *Deconstructing Harry*, Harry Block (Woody Allen) declares to his Orthodox Jewish sister: “[Religions are] clubs. They're exclusionary, all of them. They foster the concept of the Other so you know clearly who to hate...Wouldn't it be a better world if not every group thought they had a direct line to God?” Allen also depicts Mickey's parents as so embedded in their faith that they are entirely unconcerned with and seemingly ignorant of the existential questions that Mickey asks. The ontological position of Mickey's parents is probably best summed up by his mother who yells from the bathroom, “Of course there's a God you idiot!” When Mickey attempts to explain to his mother his desperate need for answers to fundamental metaphysical questions he uses the event of the Holocaust - one of Allen's favourite topics for comedy - to show the contradiction between the existence of evil in the world and the existence of a merciful God. His father's contribution to the following exchange signifies Allen's dismal hopelessness at the prospect of ever gaining adequate answers to such existential questions.

MICKEY: If there's a God, then why is there so much evil in the world? Just on a simplistic level, why were there Nazis?

MOTHER: Tell him Max!

FATHER: How the hell do I know why there were Nazis? I don't know how the can-opener works!

In the following scene, accompanied by the sacred strains of a Christian mass, Mickey returns to his apartment carrying a paper bag from which he unloads a copy of the New Testament, a crucifix, a framed picture of Jesus and, as the punch line to the joke, a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of Hellmann's mayonnaise. Here Allen brashly juxtaposes sacred symbols of Christ with highly processed American food,¹⁶ all purchased to assist him in his conversion to Catholicism, playing up his frequent association of the more vulgar aspects of American culture with Christian culture. Of course, it is the bread and mayonnaise that are placed superiorly on the top of this sacred tower of items that rest on the New Testament and this is brilliantly timed with the resolution of the Christian mass on a perfect cadence. In this scene Allen cynically reduces religion to a form of consumerism as Mickey overcompensates for his lack of spiritual belief in Christ by purchasing religious paraphernalia. The 'sacred' religious items lose all their solemnity when associated with common supermarket goods.

This series of scenes perfectly reveals Allen's contemptuous view of religion as irrational and unsubstantiated as he depicts Mickey's seemingly effortless, off-the-cuff rejection of his Jewish roots and his erratic attempt to subscribe to Catholicism and later to the Hare Krishna faith because, as Mickey explains, “I got off on the wrong foot with my own thing.” Much of the humour of the sequence comes from Allen's play on his own 'Jewishness' as he taps into the well-established view of himself as the epitome of all things Jewish. For Mickey (and for Allen), to seriously contemplate devoting himself to Christ or ISKON is laughable because both cultures are so removed from his own deep, inescapable Jewish roots (one clearly more than the other.) McCann aptly asserts, “Mickey's odyssey is comic, for to see this plainly Jewish character conversing with a Catholic priest, taking communion, and discussing theological problems with Hare Krishna disciples, is to see a man fighting his most established instincts – his irreverent Jewish wit and scepticism.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Soren Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson (trans.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1941, 182.

¹⁶ One of Allen's comedic trademarks is the way that he promiscuously mingles the sacred with the profane as he works to undermine deep metaphysical issues. Another example appears in his essay 'My Philosophy' where he states, “Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends.” See Woody Allen: 'My Philosophy', *op. cit.*, 173. Perhaps this is Allen's way of dealing with the metaphysical issues that create such anxiety and tension in his life.

¹⁷ Graham McCann: *Woody Allen: New Yorker*, USA, Polity Press, 1991, 236-237.

Mickey sadly comes to realize that he will never be convinced by religion and escapes to a movie theatre showing the Marx Brother's *Duck Soup*. Ironically, after exhaustively seeking a religious belief system that would provide him with meaning, it is ultimately through the zany and irrational *Duck Soup* that Mickey experiences a life changing epiphany. His realization is incredibly simple; he must give up agonizing over a potentially godless, meaningless universe and embrace life in all its absurdity. It is no surprise that Mickey attains enlightenment in the movie theatre, as it has always been Allen's place of worship.¹⁸ Indeed a parallel is easily drawn between the capacity of religion to provide comfort, meaning and inspiration and the awesome power of film to do the same. Having finally resolved his existential anxieties, by the film's end Mickey is in a loving relationship with Hannah's (Mia Farrow's) bubbly sister Holly (Dianne Wiest) who has just discovered that she is pregnant with Mickey's baby. The film symbolically ends, as it began, at a family Thanksgiving dinner, suggesting that one should simply give thanks for what one has and give up trying to uncover profound truths.¹⁹

In *Hannah and Her Sisters* Allen's message appears to be that the existential quest for meaning is doomed to failure. It is interesting to question whether Allen really believes in the possibility for a kind of salvation through simply re-adjusting one's views and embracing life. In an interview with Bjorkman Allen reveals his thoughts on the matter, stating that *Hannah and Her Sisters* was based on a quotation by Tolstoy, which was used as a caption in the film: "The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless." Allen asserts, "[The Tolstoy quotation was] certainly what my story was about... if I'd had a little more nerve on that film it would have confirmed it somewhat more. But I copped out... I tied it together at the end a little too neatly. I should have been a little less happy at the end than I was... it's a habit, trying to find a satisfying resolution."²⁰ Similarly in an interview with Lee, Allen criticizes the film for its positive message, which undermines his genuine realization of the ontological position: "[The ending was] more 'up' and optimistic than I had intended, and consequently was very popular. It's only optimistic in the sections where I failed."²¹

To summarize, through his treatment of existential themes in *Hannah and Her Sisters*, Allen explores the relationship between death, meaning and God. He reveals his cynical view of religion by portraying the failure of religious systems to convince poor Mickey to make the "big leap" required of him. Ultimately Mickey's emotional need for religion was incompatible with his rationality. This is Mickey's fundamental dilemma in the film, as it is Allen's dilemma in life. The ending of *Hannah and Her Sisters* is unquestionably optimistic as Allen conceives of an odd kind of personal salvation through an acknowledgement of the zaniness of life. However in reality Allen remains hopeless on such matters and admits to having "copped out" by neatly resolving existential issues that in his mind remain eternally unresolved.

In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) Allen's exploration of themes of religion takes a sinister turn through the dark story line of Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau), a prestigious ophthalmologist who murders his mistress and not only escapes punishment but, it is implied, in fact prospers by the film's end. The world portrayed in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* - a world where the good suffer, the bad prosper and no greater power will ever rectify this - is for Allen a sad consequence of his atheistic position. Four aspects of the film will be discussed; the symbolism of vision and blindness, the Passover seder debate where Judah's atheist Aunt May and Orthodox father Sol argue over the relationship between morality and God, the theme of the incomplete philosophical system as expressed in the story of Louis Levy, and finally the film's bleak conclusion, which reflects Allen's ultimate philosophical verdict.

In a compelling scene early in the film the virtuous Rabbi Ben (Sam Waterston) has his failing eyes examined by Judah.²² The pervasive symbolism of vision and blindness can be

¹⁸ Sander H. Lee: *Woody Allen's Angst: Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films*, USA, McFarland and Co., 1997, 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 212.

²⁰ Stig Bjorkman: *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Bjorkman*, London, Faber and Faber, 1995, 156.

²¹ Lee, *op. cit.*, 365.

²² Judah Rosenthal bears the first name of one of the greatest fighters for traditional Jewish values and heritage, Judah Maccabee. However the name is ironic: "Instead of defending the values of his heritage

interpreted in a number of ways. Judah is an ophthalmologist and the implication may be that he can see the real world clearly, yet paradoxically he lacks spiritual and moral vision. He is portrayed as a godlike figure (he is worshipped by his colleagues and has the power to transform people's lives) yet Judah's character commits the most heinous crime of all. Ben on the other hand is going blind; he fails to see the real world yet he has strong spiritual vision. By portraying a pious rabbi as going blind, Allen may be expressing the idea that only by blinding oneself to reality can one live a meaningful life devoted to God. In fact all of the religiously devoted characters in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* suffer from impaired vision and are portrayed wearing glasses. Perhaps this represents their inability to see the true nature of reality, which Allen identifies as godless, indifferent and corrupt. However one could interpret the symbolism differently. The virtuous, religiously inclined characters wearing glasses may symbolize those who have a clear perspective. They can see beyond superficial worldly existence to a greater transcendent reality with purpose and morality. On this reading the rabbi's blindness is symbolic of his detachment from mundane concerns, and emphasizes his unerring inner focus on what is real and meaningful - a life devoted to God.

As a representative of religion, Ben's impending blindness might also represent God's lack of vision or a blind universe indifferent to any sense of justice. This is an essential theme in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* as Allen depicts a bleak world where a moral rabbi goes blind and other virtuous characters like Cliff²³ (Woody Allen) suffer, yet Judah's murderous crime, and the immoral acts of characters such as the egotistical Hollywood director Lester (Alan Alda), go unpunished. The theme of God's blindness or indifference to justice appears in the biblical *Book of Jeremiah*, where the righteous prophet Jeremiah finds no evidence of justice or moral logic in the universe. When the people of his town of Anathoth turn against him and threaten to kill him, Jeremiah questions God's rule: "Why is it that the wicked live so prosperously? Why do scoundrels enjoy peace?"²⁴ He complains that God is blind to this injustice, "You plant them, they take root... you are always in their lips, yet so far from their hearts... [the wicked] say 'God does not see our behaviour'"²⁵.

As Judah examines Ben's eyes his dark side unravels as he reveals to Ben his two-year affair with Dolores Paley (Anjelica Huston) and her recent threats to expose their affair to his wife. The rabbi's advice is traditional as he urges Judah to confront his wife and ask for forgiveness. When Judah becomes doubtful, Ben explains their irreconcilable outlooks on the world: "You see [the world] as harsh and empty of values and pitiless, and I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure with real meaning and forgiveness, and some kind of higher power, otherwise there's no basis to know how to live." Here Allen reveals his notion of the meaningless universe; it is not only "harsh and empty of values" but is virtually intolerable as Ben declares that he "couldn't go on living" if he didn't believe in God, just as Mickey in *Hannah and Her Sisters* contemplates suicide before desperately seeking meaning through religion.

At the climax of the film Judah concludes that "God is a luxury [that he] can't afford" and arranges for Dolores to be murdered. Afterwards, in a state of despair he visits his childhood home where he stands in the liminal doorway of the dining room and recreates in his mind a Passover seder from his youth. The Allenesque debate that follows, between Judah's atheist Aunt May and religious father Sol, is an exploration of the relationship between morality and God, and the problem of morality in a godless universe. It also functions as a symbolic manifestation of both Judah's and Allen's inner conflict. Interestingly, Yacowar suggests that the name 'Sol' may be "an abbreviation of the wise Solomon or the pagan sun, the revealing

against the pagan hedonism of those who wished to oppress his people, this latter-day Judah has betrayed all." See Lee, *op. cit.*, 288. The name 'Judah' is also associated with 'praise' in the Bible: "[Leah] conceived and gave birth to a son, saying, 'This time I will give glory to Yahweh'; accordingly she named him Judah" (*Genesis* 29:35) and "Judah, your brothers shall praise you" (*Genesis* 49:8). In the film Judah is perpetually praised and glorified by his family, friends and colleagues who remain oblivious to his adulterous, embezzling and murderous actions.

²³ Cliff, a documentary filmmaker, is a moral character who in the course of the film loses his job, marriage, love, and mentor, Louis Levy.

²⁴ *Jeremiah* 12:1

²⁵ *Jeremiah* 12:2-4

force of light.”²⁶ It is unsurprising that Allen would associate Sol's vision as brighter or lighter than his own dark view of the world as an atheist. May's name may also be symbolic as Judah's Aunt shares the same name as the international workers' day holiday May Day. Indeed Sol complains to May: “Oh the intellectual, the school teacher. Spare us your Leninist philosophy just this once... go back to Russia.” Aunt May (Anna Berger) takes the position of the atheist and moral relativist in the ensuing debate as she envisions a cruel and godless world with no objective standards of good and evil and no moral purposes behind human reality. For Aunt May, individuals simply go about creating meaning and justifying their actions as they wish: “For those who want morality there's morality. Nothing's handed down in stone.” May argues that in a world where everything is permissible, there is nothing to stop an individual from committing murder other than their own conscience: “And I say, if he can do it, and get away with it, and chooses not to be bothered by the ethics, then he's home free.” This, to Allen's profound regret, is his own philosophical position.

Sol (David Howard) represents the other side of the argument, which Allen sympathizes with but cannot rationally commit to. Sol is a religious traditionalist who argues for the existence of God and consequently, for the existence of true, meaningful moral values. Where May's hypothetical murderer escapes punishment and guilt, Sol says of the murderer who is not caught, “that which originates in a black deed will blossom in a foul manner... Whether it's the Old Testament or Shakespeare, murder will out.” Sol's argument evokes Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) concept of ‘the highest good’ in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. The highest good is a condition where the happiness of an individual is proportional to their virtue, thus Kant promotes a vision of the world where moral people always find happiness, whether it is in this life or the next one. Just as Sol's argument for objective moral values is based on his belief in God, Kant asserts that the highest good is proof of the existence of God: “The highest good in the world is possible only insofar as a supreme cause of nature having a causality in keeping with the moral disposition is assumed.”²⁷ In fact, after Kant rejects all philosophical arguments for God's existence based on reason - in particular the ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the argument from design - he argues that it is the moral imperative that provides the only proof religion is capable of.

Sol makes the compelling assertion that even if God does not exist, it is still best to have faith because only through one's faith in a universe governed by a caring and moral God can one's deepest human needs be attained: “If necessary I will always choose God over truth.” This reflects another argument by Kant, this time in his earlier *Critique of Pure Reason*: “It is necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.”²⁸ For Kant, reasoning and knowledge are subjective and fallacious because they are rooted in the world of experience, the superficial world of the senses that is built in accord with the patterns of the human mind. True reality or things in themselves can never be known. Sol makes this point when he asks towards the end of the scene, “must everything be logical?” However Kant makes an exception for religion, which lies beyond the phenomenal world and thus possesses a greater and more fundamental truth. Like Sol, Kant argues that one must have faith in God and deny rational knowledge which is inevitably flawed.

Unsurprisingly, Allen leaves the seder debate unresolved as the positions of both Aunt May and Sol are clearly flawed and seem to cancel each other out; Aunt May's argument lapses into nihilism and relativism and Sol's argument is philosophically ungrounded and based on his emotional needs. Allen makes the pessimistic point that all systems of belief are ultimately incomplete. The theme of the incomplete philosophical system is also expressed in the parallel story of Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann), the life-affirming philosopher who commits suicide. Levy's philosophy, explored through Cliff's documentary on him, emphasizes the blind nature of the universe and the necessity of individuals to project onto their lives values of love and kindness: “we define ourselves by the choices we have made... It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe.” In *Existentialism is a*

²⁶ Maurice Yacowar: *Loser Takes All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen*, New York, Continuum Publishing Company, 1991, 277.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Practical Reason*, Mary Gregor (trans.), New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 104.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith (trans.), New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 29.

Humanism Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) expresses a similar philosophy: "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be... man is nothing other than what he makes for himself."²⁹

This theme also appears in the somewhat existentialist *Ecclesiastes* where an embracing of love, nature and life's simple pleasures are promoted within an otherwise meaningless universe: "I know there is no happiness for man except in pleasure and enjoyment while he lives",³⁰ and "Light is sweet; at sight of the sun the eyes are glad. However great the number of the years a man may live, let him enjoy them all... Follow the promptings of your heart and the desires of your eyes".³¹ Ironically, Levy's rather optimistic philosophy is literally thrown out the window as Allen has Levy commit suicide, leaving behind a note that reads, "I've gone out the window." His suicide depresses Cliff, mainly because Levy "was a role model: you'd think he'd leave a decent note." Cliff's love interest Halley (Mia Farrow) passes final judgement on the suicide: "No matter how elaborate a philosophical system you work out, it's got to be incomplete."

In the last scene of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* Judah and Cliff, the protagonists of the film's two parallel stories, meet at a wedding party held for Rabbi Ben's daughter. Knowing that Cliff is a filmmaker, Judah tells him the story of the murder of Dolores, disguised as an idea for a movie plot. Judah's rendition of the story is chilling because the murderous protagonist in his story escapes punishment and guilt and in fact prospers (reflecting Aunt May's argument). It is thus implied that Judah too has not only escaped punishment, but has escaped with a clear conscience and is actually content. Judah tells Cliff that his protagonist is initially "plagued by deep-rooted guilt" but "then, one morning, he wakes up and the sun is shining and his family is around him and mysteriously, the crisis is lifted... His life is completely back to normal, back to his protected world of wealth and privilege." Cliff (like Allen who plays him) is horrified by the situation in the story and argues that "in the absence of God [the murderer] has to assume responsibility himself." But for Judah, "real life isn't like that... that's fiction, that's movies." Allen makes his position clear: "We wish that we lived in a world where there was a God and where these acts would be adjudicated in some way. But we don't."³²

In the *Boston Globe and Mail*, Jay Scott sums up the mordant philosophy of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: "Although the movie is biblical in its fundamental moralism, Allen turns the tables on God. This is the work of a Job whose cries for justice are unheeded. 'Show me,' Woody Allen seems to be screaming to the heavens, 'just one place where evil does not triumph at the expense of good.' Cosmic silence; in the universe of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, God's ear is a black hole."³³ Scott is referring to a passage in the *Book of Job*, which parallels Jeremiah's complaints against God's justice in the *Book of Jeremiah*. After Job has suffered the destruction of his house, livestock and all his children yet realizes that he is completely blameless, he complains about God: "Innocent and guilty, he destroys all alike. When a suddenly deadly scourge descends, he laughs at the plight of the innocent. When a country falls into a tyrant's hand, it is he who blindfolds the judges. Or if not he, who else?"³⁴ Job argues that God has blinded the eyes of justice and that He is indifferent to the suffering of the innocent. God does not offer Job answers but instead responds with a cruel display of omnipotence: "Brace yourself like a fighter, now it is my turn to ask questions and yours to inform me... Has your arm the strength of God's, can your voice thunder as loud?"³⁵ Like the dark world created in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Job's world is one of injustice and moral anarchy, and ultimately God offers no justification for this deplorable state of affairs.

It has become clear that *Crimes and Misdemeanors* dramatically differs from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, of which the film's title is a pun. In *Crime and Punishment* Rodion Raskolnikov confesses his murder to the police even though he could have escaped

²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Carol Macomber (trans.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, 22.

³⁰ *Ecclesiastes* 3:12.

³¹ *Ecclesiastes* 11:7-9.

³² Richard Schickel: *Woody Allen: A Life in Film*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2003, 151.

³³ Baxter, *op. cit.*, 375.

³⁴ *Job* 9:23-24

³⁵ *Job* 40:7-9

punishment, and is led by the novel's end to a genuine acceptance of the possibility of religious redemption.³⁶ Judah on the other hand does not confess and instead walks away seemingly happy. The viewer's last glimpse of Judah is as he leaves the wedding party, embracing his wife and smiling contently. In an interview Allen asserts, "Judah's never really in too much of a quandary... if he doesn't choose to punish himself, nobody else will. Evil is only punished if you get caught."³⁷ To conclude, Allen's religious and existential beliefs are clearly portrayed in his films; he sees the universe as fundamentally godless and thus meaningless, futile and corrupt. His treatment of themes of religion, God, morality, death and meaning in *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* reveals his cynical view of religion, his pervasive belief in a hopeless and meaningless universe and his anxieties concerning what he sees as the dire consequences of his position as an atheist. Faced with Allen's blatantly pessimistic outlook one may wonder exactly what one's options are. Allen presents four rather pathetic reasons for continuing to live a reasonably happy, bearable life in such a world; one can acknowledge the zany absurdity of it all (Mickey's position), one can blind oneself to reality by taking a leap of faith (the position of Rabbi Ben and Sol), one can live an immoral and hedonistic life, destroying anyone that gets in the way (Judah) or one can simply commit suicide (Louis Levy). The options aren't particularly inspiring. Allen's view of the universe is truly bleak and there seems to be no reasonable way out of it. One must simply accept this sad state of affairs and rent a copy of *Duck Soup*.

³⁶ James Lawler: 'Does Morality Have to be Blind?' in Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (eds.), *Woody Allen and Philosophy: You Mean My Whole Fallacy is Wrong?*, Chicago, Open Court, 2004, 39.

³⁷ Bjorkman, *op. cit.*, 226.